FAITH FOR THE DARKNESS

November 17, 1985, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

"Hide not thy face from me." --Psalm 27:9a (RSV)

Scriptures

Psalm 27
Job 41:1-6
Mark 15:33-39

Analysts of culture sometimes suggest that each age expresses itself in one particular architectural form.

In Western Europe, in the Middle Ages -- it was the castle. In the high renaissance -- the cathedral, its spires pointing to heaven. In the 1930's, in America, the confident, aspiring skyscraper symbolized the time.

What form characterizes this time?

In his important 1983 book Religion in the Secular City, Harvard Theologian Harvey Cox suggests that a major commercial airport is the virtual incarnation of the modern era, where all our brilliant achievements and perverse flaws are on display.

"The sovereign nation-state is here, as invisible voices announce departures to the great capitals of the globe -- Cairo, London, Jarkarta...

"Science and technology gleam here. Numbers, the favored language in our quantified era, claim an equal stature with words. It is flight four-thirteen, leaving at two twenty from gate thirty-four on concourse three... Everywhere the machine shimmers,...sleek, shiny planes,...ingenious devices for moving people..quietly, mysterious computers...

"Here also is System, Standard Procedure,...uniformed attendants smooth the transactions without inviting intimacy... Everyone shares the feeling that this experience should be made as temporary as possible.

"And money talks. Here at the Big Airport the whole world is literally within our reach... It is a prospect that would have made Magellan or Marco Polo or even Ali Baba giddy. We have only to pay: preferably not with currency notes but with the little plastic pearl of great price that allows us to plug into a universal treasury of merit ard enjoy momentary satisfaction at the cost of some vague future day of reconing.

"And religion? Where is God? At Logan Airport in Boston there is a niche thoughtfully set aside for the divine. Squeezed into a side corridor, not far from where lost luggage can be sought, the footsore traveler can say a prayer to Our Lady of the Airways. The chapel is modern, almost chic, trying its best not to look too anachronistic in its improbable setting. There is a priest assigned to Our Lady of the Airways. Masses occur, occasionally funerals, sometimes even weddings. Unkind rumor has it that being assigned there is a kind of mild punishment imposed on a cleric who has come to the Chancery's attention once too often." (p.184-85)

Harvey Cox, good teacher that he is, motivated me to do some original research. There is a chapel at O'Hare, in the basement of Terminal 2. Mass is said daily. Protestant services are held. It is open 24 hours a day, and I have yet to meet anyone who has ever been there.

Cox is not advocating a higher profile for God or religion at the airport, nor am I. Although, having missed a flight at O'Hare, on one of my numerous trips in and out of here this year, due to a train that stopped an agonizing 100 yards from the terminal and left us to watching the minutes tick away, I certainly heard God's name invoked all around me with great conviction. Chapels at O'Hare are not the point. The point Harvey Cox makes here -- and the point of departure for this sermon -- is the practical atheism of the modern city, the modern ethos, modern life. It is not intentional nor devious. It just is. A thousand years ago the village was organized around the Cathedral. Today, it's the Sports Complex, the Domed Stadium, the Civic Center. The secularity -- the pragmatic atheism, or at least agnosticism -- of modernity is simply a fact.

It is a poignant reality of our era. The philosopher Hegel laid the groundwork at the beginning of the 19th Century and ever since people have been talking, until recently in whispers, about the death or at least the absence of God from life. Modern culture seems to get along very nicely without reference to God. (See Wolfhart Pannenberg, Christian Spirituality, p. 71) A distinguished Italian scholar writes -- "From the religious point of view, humanity has entered a long night that will become darker and darker with the passing of the generations and of which no end can yet be seen." (Soibino Acquavina, The Decline of the Sacred in Industrial Society, in Cox - p.11)

I think you and I know that. I think we have also learned in the past decade or so that the city is not nearly as secular as we thought, nor as secular as it appears on the surface of things. The announcement of God's death, like Mark Twain's obituary which was printed by accident during his life, is obviously premature. And yet thoughtful people do not want to minimize the deep and important theological issue of God's presence or absence. The literature of the last century and a half reflects how profoundly we have struggled with it. Nathaniel Hawthorne, for instance, wrestled with it all his life, referred to his years of squirming in a church pew as "the frozen purgatory of my childhood," and from college wrote to his mother: "The being a minister is of course out of the question. I shall not think that even you could desire me to choose so dull a way of life." Yet he could not let go of the idea of God (or better

said, in terms of Presbyterian theology, God would not let go of him!) His friend Herman Melville shared the struggle. Hawthorne wrote about Melville that "He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief." And literary critism still debates the meaning of Melville's great white whale -- is it God, or a colorless, all-color atheism from which we all shrink?" (John Updike, Hugging the Shore, p.97)

That inability to believe, but discomfort with unbelief, is -- in my judgment -- an accurate description of the modern condition. God does not appear to have much to do with our life -- particularly the suffering and injustice and the randomness of evil. And yet, there is something in us that does not want to -- cannot -- let go.

The poet John Crowe Ransom gave Martin Marty a title for a wonderful book, A Cry of Absence, and also gathered up the sense of our dilemma with these lines:

> "Two evils, monstrous either one apart,
> Possessed me, and were long and loath at going;
> A Cry of Absence, Absence, in the heart,
> And in the world the furious winter blowing."

Sometimes that can be very personal; not at all the cold detached speculations of the college philosophy seminar in which we had the adolescent luxury of debating God's existence, but the intensely personal and immediate ways of the heart. Sometimes we are sure. There are times when God is as real and tangible as the person sitting next to us. We cherish the experience -- the sense of the holy in majestic mountain or magnificent sunset, in the miracle of another's love, and the holiness of beauty in a Bach fugue. And there come moments when the whole business seems like wishful thinking, when the poetry doesn't rhyme and the music is flat, and passion has given way to boring routine and God, if he exists at all, is known more for his absence than his presence... In Marty's vivid prose... "Absence can come also, to a vast space left when the divine is distant, the sacred is remote, when God is silent." (A Cry of Absence, p.2)

The saints of the past, we are quick to assume, are saints because they lived always with a sense of God's nearness, God's immediacy and availability. We assume they all, like Brother Lawrence, practice the presence of God while washing pots and pans in the kitchen. The truth is, God is silent and absent for Saints too. The human experience, in every age, has included profound loneliness and abandonment. And there is a sense in which that experience itself -- the empty place where God belongs, the restless agnosticism, the uncomfortable unbelief, becomes a powerful affirmation of God.

I think we can identify with that, most of us. Homesickness is a product of knowing about a home; and loneliness is a product of having been loved, and grief a product of intimacy, and this theological silence -- a product of deep faith. If God doesn't exist, why in the world do we miss him so much? It's precisely the missing, you see. It's the provocative suggestion of God in the deeply human need for God. That is an intriguing thought. Langdon Gilkey at the University of Chicago is very helpful in observing that "we become aware of the problem of an ultimate source when at our depths there seems only to be a painful void." (Naming the Whirlwind, p.309) And in a lecture on homiletics... Frederick Buechner told a group of preachers to pay attention to the God who is

known to many of their people less as a presence much of the time as an absence, an empty place where grace and peace belong." (Telling the Truth, The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy and Fairy Tale, p.36)

The trouble is that the most popular styles of modern religion either don't deal with this experience or else are threatened by it and regard it as evidence of weak or bad faith on the part of the individual. Marty's book identifies the "summery spirituality" of much religion as an experience many people simply cannot claim with integrity. "Not every believer can move easily into the rhythms of Country and Western Christianity with its foot stomping, exuberant styles," he wrote. Most of the religion one sees on television or encounters on the religious shelves at the bookstore seems to promise that if you believe enough and try hard enough a life of endless cheerfulness and joyfullness will be yours. God will be immediately and cheerfully present to make every day and every experience full of sunshine.

Some are excluded by that. Many who are open to the complexities and ambiguities of modern life are not gathered up by that kind of piety. Many wish they could be, sometimes try to say the words and sing the songs, and then feel guilty because it doesn't work. Almost inevitably thoughtful people wonder about their spitirual adequacy when they compare themselves to the spiritual athletes for whom God is available at all times. Sometimes we feel like religious ninety-eight pound weaklings for whom the light of certainty and joy has not yet turned on. And who need nothing so much as the theological equivalent of Charles Atlas' old crash course in body-building and self-esteem.

What a relief, therefore, simply to return to the Bible and discover that in its pages are a lot of people like us. What a relief to be reminded of Job and the great brooding silence which met his cries of agony. What a relief to be reminded that the disciples of Jesus can be pretty dull spiritually; they they don't spend all their waking hours in prayerful ecstacy but instead keep missing the point of Jesus' teaching, failing to see the significance of what he is doing, and at the end, cower in fear, doubt and darkness -- just like the rest of us would -- before the resurrection. And what a blessed relief to read the Psalms, which is what Dr. Marty did, and to be reminded again that many of them deal with darkness, doubt, abandonment and even anger.

"Thou turnest man back to the dust" the Psalmist wrote..."all our days pass away under thy wrath. Return, O Lord! How long? Have pity on thy servants." (Psalm 90) The man who wrote that and the community which read it knew something about God's silences and absences, it would appear.

The Psalter is full of eloquent praise. And it is full of eloquent humanness:

> "O Lord, my God, I call for help by day;
> I cry out in the night before thee...
> For my soul is full of troubles.
> I am reckoned among those who go
> down to the pit." (Psalm 88)

Now that is not very cheerful. But it is there. It is there in the Bible, deeply and honestly and humanly. Religion that is unfailingly cheerful will simply not be meaningful to everyone. I do not mean that religion must be

We Presbyterians are grim enough. I'm reading a little book by Eudora Welty in which she used "Presbyterian" as a virtual synonym for straight-laced, joyless religiosity. Quite to the contrary, true and honest joy are gifts which are given to those who are true and honest human beings. And the very good news of the whole Bible is that there is room even for the human sense of abandonment and aloneness and God's absence.

Honest and saving religion is going to take into account our occasional sense of emptiness, our occasional self-pity, our occasional depression. It will accommodate and include our occasional disbelief. I think my own sense of salvation was enormously enhanced when I finally understood that God believes in us even when we do not believe in God: that God searches for us even when we give up searching for him: that God loves us even when we don't love him: and that his grace surrounds us even and particularly when we have rather intentionally tried to isolate ourselves from him.

Honest religion isn't upset by honest doubt. It will even accommodate our sense of injustice, our righteous indignation, our anger. I love a vignette Hans Kung preserves about an elderly man (Heinrich Heine) critically ill who, after years of skepticism; returned to God. "He needed a God" he said, "against whom, like Job, I could fling my complaint, my despair, my anger. God be praised that I have a God once more, since in my excessive pain I can permit myself a few curses and blasphemies; this sort of relief is not granted to the atheist." (Eternal Life, P201)

It is a relief to rediscover that Biblical faith exists in the midst of some very real darkness. And it is the saving power of the Gospel to know that the supreme revelation of God's reality, God's love, is in an event that could be seen as the most God-forsaken thing that ever happened to anybody -- and was -- for the one to whom it happened.

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Abandoned me? Left me here alone? My God, where are you when I need you?"

That's not original with you. You've said it -- or thought it -- or will -- but someone else said it first. His name is Jesus. That is the magnificance of it all. The God who is incarnate in Jesus is most real at just those times when he seems radically absent. The crucifixion, the utter God-forsakeness of that man on his cross becomes, for us, God's complete love and complete involvement in our world.

It is, for me at least, the greatest mystery of faith and the deepest comfort, that out of human abandonment, our cries for God become affirmations of God: our doubts are strong testimony, our spiritual restlessness points to a resting place, our homesickness directs us toward home, and the darkness in which we live on occasion is eloquent testimony to the light of the world which Jesus Christ is. When we cry out about God's absence, God is no longer absent, and in our laments about God's silences, God has already begun to speak.

Dr. Marty noted, and every pastor has experienced, that "Hardened urbanites, far removed from nomadic or agrarian experience, turn in crisis to those who minister to them and ask for a Psalm about the Lord as shepherd. Why? Because they resonate to a passage about walking through "the valley of the shadow of death." (Op Cit P34)

The Gospel of Jesus Christ addresses our life in its depth and at its edges, our humanity at its most human, and our needs at their most intense. The Gospel is saving precisely because it is not intimidated, threatened, nor repelled particularly by the darkness. The one who could cry out of his own abandonment is there for us when we feel abandoned. The God whose son was crucified will be for us and with us, when someone as dear and close as our own life dies; in times of profound disappointment when, with terrible clarity, we know that our lives are not going to turn out the way we planned them. The God and Father of Jesus will be there in sickness and pain: when life's unfairness weighs heavily, and when we are not being rewarded for our fidelity. The God whose son died on a cross -- a son, who in profound grief, could himself cry out, "Why have you forsaken me?" That God is no stranger to the depths of our humanity, nor the darkness in which we must occasionally do our living.

It is the most profound mystery of our faith that God is present in what feels like his absence. It is the best of news, which we cannot explain, but to which others point and which we too will know -- that in the deepest darkness, there is light, and in the most profound silence -- a Thou.

Amen.

Lord God for the depth of your commitment to us, we give you thanks. We confess, that we live -- much of the time -- without any sense of your presence. We confess, that in disappointment and pain and grief -- we wonder where you are. We praise you, great God of light, that even in our aloneness, you find us: that within our own crying for you, you are loving us: that even in our impatience, you are healing and saving. Thank you Lord God for that strong and creative love. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen